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BETHLEHEM : THE CITY OF CHILDREN.

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EACH town of the Bible possesses some peculiar characteristic drawn from its history. Nazareth has the memory of the Jewish lad growing up as a carpenter to become the world's Savior; Jezreel, the tragic story of the kings of Israel; Capernaum had its teacher; Shiloh, its pious boy and aged prophet; Hebron, with its sepulchers and pool, tells the story of a patriarch's burial and a king's vengeance. But Bethlehem is always the home of children. There the little son of Jesse grew up unnoticed by his elder brothers; there was born the child of Mary; and there his little fellows suffered the wrath of a jealous king. Were it not for its connection with these children, Bethlehem would hardly be remembered, for not even the sad stories in the book of Judges, or the beautiful story of Ruth, give to it any such general interest.

The modern town is beautifully situated on the sides and summit of a semicircle of hills. All about it are olive groves and vineyards, pasture lands and grain fields. It is in truth a "House of Bread"—and, indeed, of water, for, although it has but one spring, and that a poor one, the so-called Fountain of David, the aqueduct carrying water from Solomon's Pool, is tapped at the foot of the hill, and there are also reservoirs. Indeed, there is no more prosperous looking town and region in all southern Palestine. The town itself, with its eight thousand inhabitants, lies a little off the fine carriage road from Jerusalem to Hebron, and to reach it one has to drive up a rather steep and rough road running between garden walls and the ubiquitous religious buildings. As one gets into the town the road grows narrower, until at last its width would not permit two carriages' passing each other. For this reason the authorities com-



THE HOLY NIGHT—CORREGGIO

pel all vehicles to enter the town by one street and to leave it by another. Our ignorance of this rule came near precipitating a riot, for when our driver, who in genuine oriental fashion had succeeded in entering the city by the road intended for his



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departure, attempted to leave by the road on which he should have entered, a crowd surrounded us, pulled the carriage back, and threatened violence when the driver tried to force his horses through them.

In some ways Bethlehem is a disappointing place to visit. Although it is almost exclusively a Christian town, its inhabitants live by the trade they carry on with visitors, and no sooner does the traveler dismount in the square before the Church of the Nativity than he is surrounded by a shouting crowd of men — there are said to be ninety different establishments manufacturing souvenirs — each endeavoring to force his victim within his little shop. Once within the shop — as one is certain to be immediately, unless he most vigorously fights for freedom — the luckless man is more liable to be robbed by extortionate

charges than in any place in Palestine. The olive wood candlesticks and necklaces, the carved mother of pearl, the cups from the black stone of the Dead Sea — all these are forced upon one



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at prices fully twice those for which the same articles can be purchased in Jerusalem.

Such disagreeable features, however, one must train one's self to overlook, if a journey in the Holy Land is to yield anything but disenchantment and disappointment. For, after all, such matters are but incidents. The chief object in visiting Bethlehem is not to patronize peddlers, but to see the spot, where, according to the tradition of centuries, Jesus was born.

The Church of the Nativity — or, more accurately, of St. Mary — is a noble basilica, which, as well as any of the ancient churches of Rome itself, carries one back to the early form of a great Christian church. It is evident from the few remains of pillars that at one time it possessed a great colonnaded square or *atrium* in front of its main entrance, but this has altogether

disappeared, and the façade of the church itself shows sadly the changes which time and rebuilding have wrought. The great door has been filled up with masonry, and the entrance is by an opening so low that one must bow in order to pass through it. The reason for this singular doorway is doubtless the opportunity it offers for defense in case the church were attacked (as it often has been) by Moslems or belligerent Christians. As one again stands upright within the edifice, he finds himself in the porch, which is lower than the main building. Passing through this, one comes into the grandly simple basilica. On either side are two rows of ten columns cut from single stones, separating the nave and double aisles. The full effect of the church is, however, marred by the high wall which the Greek church has built, cutting off the transept. Yet even thus shortened, and with its old mosaics in the wall above the pillars so sadly ruined as they are, the building makes a profound impression upon the visitor. And this impression is not effaced even by the grotesque, if sacred, arrangements behind the screen. There are three churches — or parts of churches — each with its own and peculiar paraphernalia. The Greek occupies the choir and two-thirds of the transept; the Armenian, the remainder of the transept; while the Latin, St. Catharine's, though quite outside the original building, opens from it. Here in the sanctuaries of the jealous and bellicose followers of the Prince of Peace whose birthplace they guard, as in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher at Jerusalem, a Turkish soldier stands on guard to maintain order.

Directly under the transept the Chapel of the Nativity is in a subterranean room, possibly a part of a khan which had its rooms cut in the side of the hill, or, as seems more likely, a part of a catacomb like those which abound throughout the region. Three entrances lead to it or to connecting subterranean passages, one being in each of the portions of the church just mentioned. The most direct approach is by a flight of stairs leading from the south end of the Greek transept. As one goes down these stairs in the twilight one comes suddenly into a room about forty feet long, twelve wide, and ten high. It is paved,

and its walls are lined with marble, and it is lighted by thirty-two lamps. At the foot of the altar at the east end of the room a silver star is set into the pavement with the inscription *Hic de*



THE MARKET PLACE IN BETHLEHEM, WITH THE CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY IN THE BACKGROUND

Virgine Maria Jesus Christus natus est. As our little party came into this place so hallowed by tradition, the most skeptical could not but be touched with the profoundest reverence. There in the dim light were a dozen nuns upon their knees, silently praying toward the sacred spot. Their earnest faces and the memory of what the spot represented gave to the superstition and rivalry of sects a pathos shared by no other of the numerous holy places in Palestine, unless it be Gethsemane.

Just out from this long room is a little chamber, three steps lower, in which is the chapel of the manger. Here tradition says Jesus was laid after his birth. The room is hung with tawdry tapestry and pictures. The niche for the "manger,"

which itself has disappeared, like the altar of the magi opposite, resembles one of the little niches made for the reception of the body in funeral chambers, and seems to have been cut in the



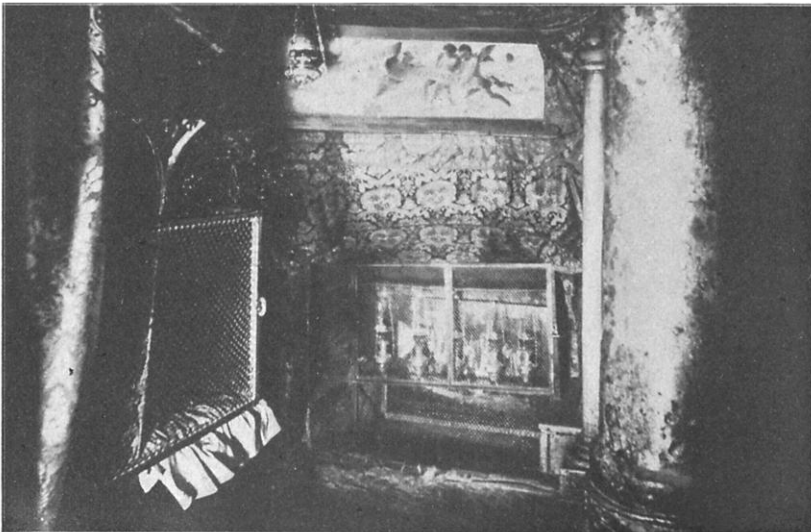
CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY

living rock. The front of the little opening is covered with an iron grating, behind which lies the wax doll which represents the infant Christ.

Connected with this Chapel of the Nativity by passages cut in the rock are a number of other chapels, all of which have a greater or less supply of legends. But, without excepting even the room in which Jerome is said (and with probability) to have lived, they are all inferior in interest to this spot where for fifteen hundred years at least the Christian church has believed its Master was born.

Outside the town are the traditional sites of the city and fields of the shepherds, as well as the field of Boaz, but it is, of

course, impossible to accept such identification as certain. But, after all, it makes little difference. For, as one drives rattling through the rough, narrow streets and by the dirty homes in which donkeys and children seem to live in peaceful communism, although one may now and then catch a glimpse of some of the beautiful women for which Bethlehem is noted, the disgust and disappointment which traditional sites and Syrian bigotry excite weaken one's sympathy in all local identification, and one falls back with increasing content upon the recollection that the folly of an ignorant Christianity and the zeal of over-wise scholars can never change the land itself, and that the hills and the valleys and the sweeping landscape are the same that greeted the young mother as she came to the little town, and the same as those over which the young David looked in the days of the young Jewish state.



THE ALTAR OF THE MAGI (L) AND THE MANGER (R)